

INTERVIEWEE: KAREN SAUSMAN

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Young

SUBJECT:

DATE: 21 January 1981

TRANSCRIBER: Linda A. Jantzen

PY: This is an interview with Karen Sausman for the Historical Society of Palm Desert Oral History Project on January 20th, 1981 by Patricia Young at the Living Desert Reserve in Palm Desert.

KS: I'm just rather squeeking in soft here this morning. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve. One, two, four, seven. Amy is a good dog.

PY: Okay. Let's start this morning, it's around nine o'clock, I forgot to mention that, talking about how the Living Desert Reserve, the concept of it, came into being. Who was involved with that because I assume you were^{not} here in the very beginning of it.

KS: You're right. I did not arrive until 1970. The original concept of the Living Desert Reserve as I can understand it really came about through the efforts

of a gentleman named Phillip Boyd who at that time back in the early fifties owned some property on the Deep Canyon Flood Plain on what's now Portola Avenue, and he'd look up against the mountains and see a lot of vandalism and abuse of the area. And he kept thinking about it would be nice to just have that area set aside. The land was owned by the Water District, Coachella Valley County Water District. And he went to the district and he asked them, you know, if they couldn't set that up as a preserve or, you know, if he couldn't somehow, you know, work with them to make a nature reserve out of it. And they told him that, while they were interested in the concept, they couldn't deal with a private individual. If he could get some organization, some charitable organization, to get involved, that maybe they could work something out. So he went to the Palm Springs Desert Museum and where he was a trustee, and suggested that the museum lease from the Water District a parcel of a couple of hundred acres there for a nature reserve, wildlife sanctuary. And ultimately this did occur, but this would be now, you know, in about fifty-three, I think. And from fifty-three until sixty-five or thereabouts,

really nothing happened. I mean now the land was leased by the museum, but it was still being trespassed on, and Mr. Boyd still wasn't satisfied that really anything had been truly accomplished. And so he tried to establish a working kind of nature center out here. He and the late Dr. Roy Hudson worked together and put in a nature trail system. And he had Dr. Yeager and Randall Henderson and Herman Spease from the University of California come out and look at the plant life and the animal life out here to ascertain the value of the area from that standpoint. But it's hard to maintain and operate a facility fifteen, sixteen miles away. And the museum was struggling for funds, and so there just wasn't any funds available to do anything out here. And he got more and more frustrated, and along with others who were interested in the sanctuary. It was in 1970 that a lawyer by the name of Lucien Shaw who retired here to Palm Desert, but had been interested in the desert and had been a lawyer for Mrs. McManus for a couple of years suggested that a division of the museum be established, written into the bylaws, with its own governing board and its own membership and its own fund-raising responsibilities. And this way only

people seriously interested in the desert and desert preservation might kind of come together as a focus on the wildlife sanctuary. And so by March of 1970, such a division was created and an initial organizational meeting was put together at the museum. Anybody that was interested was asked to turn up and a good number of people turned up. I wasn't there, but I understand somewhere in the vicinity of fifty or seventy people turned out for this meeting. And from this fifty or seventy people, a board of governors was elected. And on that board were Mr. Boyd, and Mr. Shaw became the first president. Saul Lesser was on the board, and many names, well-known names in the valley, that are interested in the valley. Their first job as a duly-functioning board was to search for an employee to guide the operation. Apparently after some amount of search they were put into contact with me, even though I was right in Palm Springs anyway. And after a couple of interviews decided they'd go ahead and hire me at that time. So I was hired in May of seventy. What has been happening since, I think, has been just steady growth and progress of the reserve. We are now a separate nonprofit organization. We're no longer a division of the museum which simplifies our existence

somewhat. And so we, after what, twenty-eight, twenty-nine years of endeavor by Mr. Boyd, who is still here three and four days a week, his dreams to preserve this area as a wildlife sanctuary and nature center have been reasonably fulfilled. But it took his tenacity for all those years really; for the first eighteen years just hanging on while nothing really happened. But that's sort of its history of where it's been.

PY: I had read somewhere that you had said the original concept was preserving a portion of the Colorado Desert, but that that over the years has changed in standard. Can you talk a bit about that?

KS: Yes, gladly. In my mind as a person interested in nature, let's start there just as a lay person, and then I'm obviously a professional specialist, but even as a lay person the idea of preserving, let's say, a thousand acres which is what we have now, give or take a couple of hundred, putting a fence around it if we could, and just saying, okay, we have now preserved a piece of desert is frankly very minuscule thing to do in today's problems facing the environment. A thousand acres is less than a drop in a bucket. It wouldn't even make a little ripple towards the preser-

vation of wild lands and environmental quality. It just doesn't. It was my feelings from the beginning that the land could be used more fruitfully as more than just a preserve, more than just locking it up. There are some areas, natural areas, of our landscape which are so fragile and so delicate and so unique that the only way, the only appropriate thing to do with them is lock them up and keep people out. But there is nothing about our landscape here that is particularly fragile or delicate. It was extremely representative of the Colorado Desert and in that sense it was a good piece of land to use for environmental interpretation because it had been my hope, and I think it quickly for the board of governors thought about it for a minute or two became everybody's hope that if we could utilize this land as a teaching center to create an awareness and an appreciation for desert, its land forms, its plant forms, its animal forms that by creating and educating hopefully vast numbers of people to the beauties and the delicateness and the fragileness of desert we could go a long way towards presumably preserving environmental values over a greater area because those same people would be more likely to

become environmentally concerned when they saw vast areas of desert being abused or misused. And they're learning here, might hopefully lead them towards making environmental decisions as voters or whatever that could affect far greater portions of land than just our thousand acres. So it seemed to me that, number one, rather than just putting a fence around a thousand acres, we wanted to utilize that land for environmental interpretation, but that has recently being amended by me; I don't know if the board of governors has caught up with me yet, but that ten years ago, I think that was the main emphasis in my mind was environmental interpretation. It still is a main emphasis, but one that is beginning to approach in my mind almost as important a function because of our space, the availability of space. We have a thousand acres which is a reasonable amount of space. Is that, I think as we mature as an organization, we can not only do the interpretation, the teaching, but I think we are in a position to ultimately do some preservation, not of our thousand acres. That's there and not really going anywhere. But rather using some of the thousand acres, a portion of it maybe, a hundred acres or two

hundred acres of the thousand, for direct preservation projects. And we took our first step in that direction way back in 1973 when we, with the University of California's assistance and the Department of Fishing Games' assistance, built an enclosure for endangered desert big horn and have been working with those agencies to learn about the behavior and the ecology of big horn and propagating this endangered species. And it occurs to me that we have the space to take other desert species that are threatened, severely threatened, be they animals or plants, and do some propagation for, of these species. And they need not be local. Our desert big horn happens to be local, but there are severely threatened desert species throughout the globe. And we have the appropriate climate to also be of assistance in the preservation of species of plants and animals that are threatened. So I am beginning to see more and more our role of education and preservation, but a different type of preservation than was probably initially conceived of. We won't ever, I'm sure, get in the business of trying to preserve every desert species as threatened. It's beyond our current capabilities. Or even our foreseeable

capabilities. But I think if we make an attempt to take ahold of a few that are seriously threatened, we can do a tremendous service beyond the educational service. So it has changed, yes, from a community nature concept which in all honestly I never saw this from the day I was hired. I saw it as more than that. I saw it as an interpretative center for desert, period. Not just Coachella Valley Desert, but for all desert. And I have been working along that lines ever since I came. Then this current thing is something that just seems to getting stronger in me and one of these days the board and I will address it as a group and see whether or not they agree with it. But if the facility has the opportunity to do some very, very serious and important work.

PY: Has it been recognized in

KS: Yes. We have primarily because I personally have been a member of the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums and a member of other agencies, too. But I've been a member of that organization for fourteen years and have been an extremely active member in the organization. And in the reorganization of that particular organization. So that I am well known in

the professional field. And because of that I have been able to bring back to the reserve a certain reputation for doing things in a bigger, not necessarily bigger, but let's say a more professional way than most other community nature centers might tackle them because I really do see us as part of a much bigger whole and not as part of a community, little community, nature center. And I think there is a role for an organization like this that many community centers could do, especially if they were blessed with the space that we are. And that it's one thing to teach about the community of animals and plants, and I think those are excellent place to start an educational program because you can tie people into what they know and see outside their door. But that's like it's just the beginning as I see, opening paragraph in the chapter. You start off at some point where you and people communicate. And then you try to bring them beyond that and try to see the parallels in deserts throughout the world. And show them that, you know, ours is not unique, and our problems are not unique. And so at any rate the reserve has an excellent reputation in the profession. And I've been able to fortunately attract a certain amount of reasonable, favorable publicity from the media

because of what we're doing and because of my personal background and involvement in the Zoological Park Association.

PY: So is it one of a kind on a national level?

KS: Well, yes and no. It's one of a kind certainly in this country because there are other facilities that are attempting to do roughly what I'm doing, but they're not doing it with desert. There's a facility conceivably going to be put together that's going to deal with North American mammals. There's another facility that's being put together in Israel on the animals and plants of the Bible. But when you talk about a three-pronged organization, a zoological organization, a botanical organization, and a research in terms of breeding and finally educational, there isn't anybody quite tackling all of that when it comes to desert. The reserve is a composite of different types of facilities and will continue to mature into a greater composite. We use the display techniques of the normal zoo and to show a variety of creatures, but our breeding areas that I envision and that we already have are more like the conservation and propagation centers that some zoos have offsite. Then we spend as

much time and effort in botanical displays as a regular botanical garden does. And our botanical displays stand on their own rather than, they're very gorgeous and lovely botanical displays of some of our major zoos, but they're used as landscaping. And we have botanical displays that stand purely as botanicals. And then our education program, I think, has frantically, for a facility of our size, I don't think there's any better in the country. So we're a composite organization. The closest thing to us in the country is probably the Arizona Senora Desert Museum in Tucson. But the places where they are different is that their botanicals are not as strongly accentuated as ours. They use them again primarily for landscaping, not in the different desert gardens as we do. They have at this point in time far greater animal exhibits, but they are totally confining themselves to animals and plants of the Senora Desert region. Whereas our parameter is desert, period, whether it's desert here or desert in Arizona or desert in South Africa. There are so many parallels that my efforts are to help people understand desert, period, and also at the same time I say to perhaps begin now to help and assist in the propagation of some threatened

desert species regardless of where they're from.

PY: Can you talk a bit more and elaborate on the educational, the aspects of the educational organization et cetera?

KS: The reserve has since its inception encouraged the use of school groups to come to the reserve. We were not able to afford a full-time educator until seventy-five. And really didn't bring a top-flight person in until seventy-six. But since seventy-six, we have an active, volunteer teachers' program called _____ who volunteer first of all to go through very rigorous educational programs themselves taught by our curator of education. Many of them have told me that it's more rigorous than any college class they've ever been through. And so after they have successfully completed the training course, which I think runs fourteen weeks, then and only then are they allowed to volunteer their time to take classes around. All classes that come to the reserve come on a reservation basis and must be accompanied by our trained people. We have special programs for different age levels and special programs for the same age level, so that if a group wants to come back they can get one program one time and another program some other time. The reserve during the busiest

time which will be coming up now will have a class on it, or two classes on every day five days a week. And we've also instituted an outreach program where we take the desert to the classroom if the classroom can't come to us. And then in addition to those kinds of things, we do a lot of special educational programming right

here for adult

We do a lot of night programs, lectures, classes, in natural history. This year we're experimenting and also doing programs or classes in water-color so people can paint the desert's animals and plants and scenery. And we're doing sculpture classes using live animals as models. And those have been very, very successfully received. So we have people that go out and give lectures to groups if they request them on desert topics. And a great portion of our time and effort is spent in specialized educational programs because it is one of the main thrusts of what we do.

PY: How do you attract so many volunteers. I mean, you have so many that are so dedicated.

KS: Well, it's a combination of things, I think. First of all, we don't think there's so many; we need more. But it requires getting a few in somehow and then treating those very well. They're giving you their time. Well,

you need to give them something back. And what we try to give them back is a good learning experience, a feeling of being part of the organization. And that's up to the, really it's out of my hands because I don't spend that much time with the volunteers. But each of the curators, and each department has volunteers, we have the in the educational program. We have animal care volunteers in the animal department. We have garden volunteers in the garden department. Have auxiliary volunteers who man the reception desks and so forth. And it's the key job of the paid staff person those people work with to treat them with respect and to treat those people with respect, to teach them, to make them feel like they are doing something worthwhile, not to give them any busy work to do, to make them feel a part of the organization. And if you can do that, if you can give people something back, worthwhile for their time, the word spreads. And those volunteers will bring you more volunteers. And so that and that is the key to the success of any volunteer program. It really rides with the paid professional staff person the volunteer works with.

PY: Elaborating on that again, what's the relationship been

with the community? Has there been a lot of community support for the reserve?

KS: Well, I think so. It's always sort of hidden away, I think, sometimes because I know, I personally have felt that we have not been as successful as I would like us to be in making the community aware that we exist even. For awhile I used to give serious thought of going up on Eisenhower Mountain and setting myself afire and yell and see if anybody would notice. But it takes maturity. The people who come to the cove communities to retire for the most part are involved in other kinds of social things. And we are not real high on the social schedule. And so making them aware of us, fitting us into their schedule, has been a slow process. It's also been slow in educating the business community of the area to accept us and to realize that we are actually a benefit to them in providing a more well-rounded community, and in essence a local attraction that can and should attract tourism to their community. And it's really only been within the last year or so that we're beginning to see any serious breakthrough in the fact that the community remembers we're here. I think a lot of that's to do with the fact that for so long we

were here. We've been here since 1952 as a sign on Portola. And they got used to the fact that while the sign was there, there was nothing there. And we find if we can get people up here who have been in the community for a long time that invariably their comment is, "I didn't realize there was this much to see up here. I just thought you had some walking trails." And, you know, I can write PR about aviaries and about night programs and apparently nobody reads it or it's the preconceived notion is that there is very little here. And almost everybody that comes from the community that already has that conception varies from pleasantly surprised to shocked as to what's here. And so we've been working hard very recently trying to just get them here. We had a Chamber of Commerce mixer here. We've had those kinds of things. Trying to wake the community up into realizing we're here so that we can get some better community support. Nobody's out against us. They just tend to either take us for granted or pay us no attention because we can't be very much. And if we can get over that misconception, I think we could get better community support. But getting over it has been like scanning a tall building. It

really has. So I think they're proud of us, those of us that know about it are proud of what we're doing, but for the most part I'm afraid we have a long way to go to have the enthusiasm, let's say, that I'd love to have everybody in San Diego knows they have the world-famous San Diego/ That's, you know, that's the first thing they do when people come to town. Well, we don't have a world-famous San Diego Zoo, but we have, you know, Living Desert Resort. And if I could have that kind of community support, we'd be a lot better off financially and we'd be able to do more than we're doing now if we could just break through. And we're breaking, but it's like chipping concrete. It's very slow.

PY: Are you more associated with Palm Springs in the minds of people than you are with Palm Desert or the cove area?

KS: No, I don't think so. That's part of the reason we became a separate organization to begin with was to be less associated with Palm Springs. Part of the reason we are moving so slowly or did move so slowly was that, yes, the division of the museum, people just assumed we were loved and funded by the museum, and we were

neither. So at any rate, now that we're all in separate entity, you know, we are trying to make the peoples of the cove community, in particular Palm Desert and Indian Wells, because our property is in both communities feel some degree of responsibility, not responsibility, but some degree of pride of ownership on the sense of, you know, belonging to their community because as I'm sure you're discovering in your studies, there is a tremendous amount of individual community pride between all the communities in the valley. This is not one big happy family. This is one valley with a whole bunch of communities, and each one has its own identity who wants to keep its own identity. And I recognize that. And so, while there's only one of us for the whole valley and while we try to get community support, we really do it on a community by community basis because people are interested in their community. And so obviously our main thrust is to convince Indian Wells and Palm Desert that we exist. And we have accomplished that in the offices, the administrative offices of the cities. They know we're here. But trying to get community pride in the organization is difficult. And also this is a very competitive area for the free dollar because there are

many very fine charitable kinds of things going on. And many of them are more fashionable than we are. We have two big hospitals constantly fund-raising at levels beyond my comprehensibility. I don't understand how they can do those kinds of things, but they do them. And, you know, a myriad of other very fine worthwhile things to support. And so it is a challenge to, you know, bring your own thing into perspective with those kinds of things. So we still have a ways to go before we have the kind of community support that I'd like to see us have.

PY: What's the relationship between the reserve and the research center?

KS: There's no on-paper relationship legally. The research center is owned and operated by the University of California, operated through the Riverside campus. Mr. Phillip Boyd, the same gentleman that's had the impetus for Living Desert Reserve, also had the impetus for the research center, and gave the university about three thousand or some acres towards the research center's development and was a regent for the University of California. And so with his interest lying so strongly in both facilities, there's a tremendous amount of

exchange of information and great cooperation between both facilities. I am on the staff of the University of California purely as a research mammalogist so that I can move in and out of the research center easily, and also oversee the big horn sheep research. Play with this one. So that while there's nothing on paper, there's a lot of cooperation that goes on between the two facilities.

PY: What's the status of the property here? I assume that there's a fifty-year loan on some of it from the Water District and then Indian Wells owns the rest, is that . . .

KS: More or less. Yes, we have a lease from the Water District, and then we have a lease from the city of Indian Wells. We are in the midst of acquiring some property and releasing some property which will wind up with us having more property. We'll then have close to twelve hundred acres. Either we will own some of that outright or we may indeed turn around and give it to the Water District so we can lease it from them. There's some advantages to being a lessee. And so this is why we've never been concerned or have any strong needs or drives to try to buy the property from either the district or from the city of Indian Wells. The

leases are good and strong and secure and we're not at all concerned with them. They are fifty-year leases with options to extend for another fifty years which takes it beyond my concerns. But also, frankly, at that time the reserve will either be so well established; it's not going to go anyplace. So we're not concerned about the leases, but it is all leased land at this time.

PY: Can you talk about how Eisenhower Mountain and Trail and everything

KS: Well, the mountain had been informally called Eisenhower Mountain and less formally Ike's Peak for a long time, even before I came here. When there became the possibility to get that piece of land from the federal government as a bureau piece of land, we went to the city of Indian Wells because it had to be purchased from the federal government and the city had some funds for parks and so they decided to purchase it. And then we thought how nice it would be if, since it was informally called those things, why we couldn't formally have it named. So Mr. Boyd and myself went through the long and tedious governmental process of applying for and getting the USGS geologic survey to actually name the mountain Eisenhower Mountain. And then we had a

dedication of the mountain, and we put in a trail that goes up the flank of the mountain. It doesn't go all the way to the top yet, but it goes up about halfway to a nice broad, flat area which we call a saddle. And in that area we have a picnic bench and a shade ramada. So this was all done in seventy-six.

PY: By a local resident.

KS: Well, the picnic area was done by a local resident. It was given to us, the funds. But the naming and the dedication and everything happened in October of seventy-six. So that is part of the land we leased from the city of Indian Wells.

PY: And in terms of the construction of the buildings here, what was the progression?

KS: Well, we built, the first thing we did was build the building you're in now, the administration building, building we call McCallum Hall, which was our original visitors center. It's a multipurpose building. And those were finished in January of seventy-two. Then the next thing up in seventy-four was the development center which is a building which houses the curator's office for the garden department and the, what turned into being the graphics office, the work area for the

development of signs and labels and things. We built at that time also a lath house for propagation of plant material. Then the next structure up was the

Center which houses our live animal, small live animal, exhibits and has a full basement underneath which we use for storage and workshop. And that was finished in early seventy-eight, followed by a walk-through aviary in early seventy-nine. And then the animal care center which is kind of a commissary and animal nursery area office for the curator of the animal department was finished in late seventy-nine. And then the greenhouse finished in early eighty. So that's the rough progression of the facility.

PY: And funds for construction

KS: Totally from private donations, either from private individuals or private foundations. We don't receive or solicit any kind of governmental funds for anything. It's all private.

PY: Have you been getting any
in other words, in terms of time or talent?

KS: We've had some. We have been very fortunate, yes, in that we have several contractors who have assisted us in construction and often are very generous. They are

careful with their bids on our big buildings and sometimes if they're doing something for us, they'll do a little thing at no charge at all. So we've been very fortunate that way in having at least reasonably bid buildings.

PY: Whds the contractor, I mean the architect?

KS: The architect for all the buildings has been John and he has donated his time and services to all of them. So he's designed every building we have. We work together. I go down with the building drawn up on a little piece of paper, and then he turns it into something that will stand up without falling down. But in actual layout, physical layout, of the buildings and what they're supposed to be and where the rooms are and how big the rooms are, that's my job. And I give him that and then he turns it into something that can be built.

PY: Where do your ideas come from for that?

KS: Oh, from what I've seen that works and doesn't work of other facilities primarily, and from middle of the night ideas, I think probably. But you visit a lot of facilities in this business because you don't want to make the same mistakes somebody else made. You'd rather make a new one.

So it usually, it's a combination. Hardly ever do you build anything exactly like somebody else built because they've already found out what they did wrong. And at the same time you have a different needs, but you study what other people have done and what works and plus what you think you want. And it's kind of like deciding what you want for your own house, where you want the rooms and how you want the flow to be. Nobody knows that better than you, so that's why it's been easier for me to do the whole layout and then hand it to him and say, "John, please see if this can be put together so it will stand up functionally." I've even learned over the years to remember to leave a space for the air conditioning units and the heating units and all that business in it. And put the bathrooms back to back and stuff like that. So he's getting me well trained, basic design.

PY: Any sense of concept of desert architecture coming into that?

KS: No, I think our concept has always been modest in the sense that both John and I feel that there's no sense to create monuments out of the buildings. That's not what we're here for. And so the buildings have always

just functional, understated, quiet, subdued buildings that blend in with the terrain without any extravagances in them. We don't have a lot of open beams and fancy thises and thats because we would rather use the money to doing the work, not in having a fancy thing to hold it together. And I've always been one of let's do it functionally and well, but we don't as you'll when you look around realize do any buildings that could be considered monuments in and of themselves. There are too many natural history buildings that unfortunately do that, and I think it's a bit of a waste. Somebody, I guess, needs to build fancy buildings, but not me.

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END OF INTERVIEW